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Feb 10, 2025 12 min



“This is what militaries do during coups: you capture the major targets, with government buildings high on the list, and you take over communications and other systems.”

Ruth Ben-Ghiat, historian on fascism and authoritarian leaders

How something is done is just as important as *why* something is done.

To suggest that the ends justify the means is to launch oneself down a moral, ethical and legal rabbit hole that leaves us in a totalitarian bind.

We are already halfway down that road.

Whatever the justifications for discarding, even temporarily, the constitutional framework and protocols that have long served as the foundations for our republic (national security, an economic crisis, terrorists at the border, a global pandemic, etc.), none of them are worth the price we are being asked to pay—the rule of law—for what is amounting to a hostile takeover of the U.S. government by an oligarchic elite.

This is no longer a conversation about stolen elections, insurrections, or even the Deep State.

This has become a lesson in how quickly things can fall apart.

This is what all those years of partisan double standards and constitutional undermining and legislative sell-outs and judicial betrayals add up to: a coup by oligarchic forces intent on a hostile takeover.

The government’s past efforts to sidestep the rule of law pale in comparison to what is unfolding right now, which is nothing less than the complete dismantling of every last foundational principle for a representative government that answers to “we the people.”

This shock-and-awe blitz campaign of daily seizures, raids and overreaching executive orders is a deliberate attempt to keep us distracted and diverted while the government is remade in the image of an autocracy, one in which privacy, due process, the rule of law, free speech, and equality will all be contingent on whether you are worthy of the *privilege* of rights.

I have long insisted on the need to recalibrate the government, but *this* is not how one goes about it.

The issue is not whether the actions being taken by the Trump Administration are right or wrong—although there are many that are egregiously wrong and some that are long overdue—but whether the Executive Branch has the power to unilaterally override the Constitution.

If we allow this imperial coup to move forward without pushback or protest, we will be just as culpable as those signing the death warrant for our freedoms.

Power corrupts.

And absolute power corrupts absolutely.

However, it takes a culture of entitlement and a nation of compliant, willfully ignorant, politically divided citizens to provide the foundations of tyranny.

For too long now, America has played politics with its principles and allowed the president and his colleagues to act in violation of the rule of law.

“We the people” are paying the price for it now.

Since the early days of our republic, we have operated under the principle that no one is above the law.

As Thomas Paine observed in *Common Sense*, **“In America, the law is king. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law ought to be king; and there ought to be no other.”**

Several years later, John Adams, seeking to reinforce this important principle, declared in the Massachusetts Constitution that they were seeking to establish “a government of laws and not of men.”

The history of our nation over the past 200-plus years has been the history of a people engaged in a constant struggle to maintain that tenuous balance **between the rule of law—in our case, the United States Constitution—and the government leaders entrusted with protecting it, upholding it and abiding by it.**

At various junctures, when that necessary balance has been thrown off by overreaching government bodies or overly ambitious individuals, we have found ourselves faced with a crisis of constitutional proportions.

Each time, we have taken the painful steps needed to restore our constitutional equilibrium.

That was then, this is now, and for too long now, we have failed to recognize and rectify **the danger in allowing a single individual to declare himself the exception to the rule of law and assume the role of judge, jury, and executioner.**

For all intents and purposes, we have become a nation ruled not by laws but by men, and fallible, imperfect men, at that.

We allowed Bush to overstep. We allowed Obama to overstep. We allowed Trump to overstep. We allowed Biden to overstep.

These power grabs by the Trump Administration, aided and abetted by Elon Musk, are more than an overstep, however.

All of us are in danger.

Those cheering the erection of migrant camps at Guantanamo, take heed: you could be next.

It's no longer a question of *whether* the government will lock up Americans for defying its mandates but ***when***.

Partisan politics have no place in what is unfolding now.

This is what we know: the government has the means, the muscle and the motivation to detain individuals who resist its orders and do not comply with its mandates in a vast array of prisons, detention centers, and concentration camps paid for with taxpayer dollars.

It's just a matter of time.

It no longer matters what the hot-button issue might be (vaccine mandates, immigration, gun rights, abortion, same-sex marriage, healthcare, criticizing the government, protesting election results, etc.) or which party is wielding its power like a hammer.

The groundwork has already been laid.

Under the indefinite detention provision of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the President and the military can detain and imprison American citizens with no access to friends, family or the courts if the government believes them to be a terrorist.

So, it should come as no surprise that merely criticizing the government could get you labeled as a terrorist.

After all, it doesn't take much to be considered a terrorist anymore, especially given that the government likes to use the words "anti-government," "extremist" and "terrorist" interchangeably.

This is what happens when you not only put the power to determine who is a *potential* danger in the hands of government agencies, the courts and the police but also give those agencies liberal authority to lock individuals up for perceived wrongs.

It's a system just begging to be abused by power-hungry bureaucrats desperate to retain their power at all costs.

It's happened before.

As history shows, the U.S. government is not averse to locking up its own citizens for its own purposes.

One need only go back to the 1940s, when the federal government proclaimed that Japanese-Americans, labeled potential dissidents, could be put in concentration (a.k.a. internment) camps based only upon their ethnic origin, to see the lengths the federal government will go to in order to maintain "order" in the homeland.

The U.S. Supreme Court validated the detention program in *Korematsu v. US* (1944), concluding that the government's need to ensure the safety of the country trumped personal liberties.

Although that *Korematsu* decision was never formally overturned, Chief Justice Roberts opined in *Trump v. Hawaii* (2018) that "the forcible relocation of U. S. citizens to concentration camps, solely and explicitly on the basis of race, is objectively unlawful and outside the scope of Presidential authority."

Roberts' statements provide little assurance of safety in light of the government's tendency to sidestep the rule of law when it suits its purposes. Pointing out that such blatantly illegal detentions could happen again—with the blessing of the courts—Justice Scalia once warned, **"In times of war, the laws fall silent."**

We seem to be coming full circle on many fronts.

Consider that two decades ago we were debating whether non-citizens—for example, so-called enemy combatants being held at Guantanamo Bay and Muslim-Americans rounded up in the wake of 9/11—were entitled to protections under the Constitution, specifically as they relate to indefinite detention.

Americans weren't overly concerned about the rights of non-citizens then, nor do they seem all that concerned now. And yet in the near future we could well be the ones in the unenviable position of being targeted for indefinite detention by our own government.

Similarly, most Americans weren't unduly concerned when the U.S. Supreme Court gave Arizona police officers the green light to stop, search and question anyone—ostensibly those fitting a particular racial profile—they suspect might be an illegal immigrant. More than a decade later, the cops largely have carte blanche authority to stop any individual, citizen and non-citizen alike, they suspect might be doing something illegal.

As I point out in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* and in its fictional counterpart *The Erik Blair Diaries*, it will only be a matter of time before those brainwashed into believing that *they* have nothing to worry about learn the hard way that in a police state, it doesn't matter who you are or how righteous you claim to be, because eventually, you will be lumped in with everyone else and everything you do will be “wrong” and suspect.

Martin Niemöller learned that particular lesson the hard way.

A German military officer turned theologian, Niemöller was an early supporter of Hitler's rise to power. It was only when Hitler threatened to attack the churches that Niemöller openly opposed the regime. For his efforts, Niemöller was arrested, charged with activities against the government, fined, detained, and eventually interned in the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps from 1938 to 1945.

As Niemöller reportedly replied when asked by his cellmate why he ever supported the Nazi party:

“I find myself wondering about that too. I wonder about it as much as I regret it. Still, it is true that Hitler betrayed me... Hitler promised me on his word of honor, to protect the Church, and not to issue any anti-Church laws. He also agreed not to allow pogroms against the Jews... Hitler's assurance satisfied me at the time...I am

paying for that mistake now; and not me alone, but thousands of other persons like me.”

Source:

https://www.rutherford.org/publications_resources/john_whiteheads_commentary/sleepwalking_into_tyranny_how_power_is_silently_being_seized

Original Article: <https://off-guardian.org/2025/02/10/sleepwalking-into-tyranny-how-power-is-silently-being-seized/>



Elon Musk and Donald Trump watch the launch of a SpaceX Starship rocket test flight, Nov. 19, 2024, Brownsville, TX. Brandon Bell/Getty Images.

A New Kind of Coup: Trump and Musk are Updating the Autocratic Playbook

Ruth Ben-Ghiat | substack.com/@lucid

It seems like the plot of a political thriller. **We are living through a new kind of coup** in which Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, has taken over the payment and other administration systems that allow the American government to function, and has locked out federal employees from computer systems. Many of Musk's collaborators in this endeavor previously worked for his private companies and/or helped him take over Twitter.

Musk is subject to no Congressional or other oversight because he seems to have no real official function other than as head of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, a plunder operation that was named after the cryptocurrency DOGE.

When I wrote my 2017 CNN essay, "Trump and Bannon's Coup in the Making," that described Donald Trump's intent to give power to "a small group of loyal insiders, who take orders directly from the leader's inner circle and...bypass those of the existing federal government and party bureaucracies," Musk was not on my radar. Today, Musk would replace Steve Bannon in the title.

What is happening now builds on classic authoritarian dynamics as I described them in Strongmen and in many essays for Lucid. There is always an "inner sanctum" that really runs the show, with its mix of family members and cronies, some with histories of working with or for foreign powers. And there is almost always a purge of the federal bureaucracy. That is now being carried out on a mass scale.

Historian Heather Cox Richardson, former FBI agent Asha Rangappa, former U.S. Attorney Joyce White Vance, and others have analyzed these processes and the interrelated factions that are implementing what I have called a Fascist-style counterrevolution: the MAGA loyalists inside and outside of the GOP, the Project 2025/Heritage Foundation crew (**roughly two-thirds of the executive orders Trump has issued conform to Project 2025 plans**), and the technocrats around Musk and Peter Thiel.

Vice President J.D. Vance shows the overlap among the categories. Vance is a MAGA loyalist; he wrote the forward to Heritage CEO Kevin Robert's book *Dawn's Early Light: Taking Back Washington To Save America*; and he is the surrogate of Thiel, who bankrolled not only Vance's Senate race but also his private business ventures.

All of these individuals and groups want to rearrange government around an extremist ideological project of Christian nationalism and White supremacy, and most of them want to enact neoliberal deregulation and privatization measures to “free” America from “corruption” and “drain the swamp.” This is part of the “revolution” Roberts has long talked about, and **it has a history that runs through right-wing dictatorships across a century.**

The speed of its implementation makes Trump’s takeover stand out within an authoritarian framework. The more corrupt and criminal the autocrat, the more he is obsessed with punishing enemies and feeling safe. Cue the immediate execution of the revenge and retribution part of this plan, with anyone who was involved in attempts to bring Trump and his collaborators to justice for the Jan. 6 insurrection or anything else, FBI employees included, is now a target.

Only with coups –or crackdowns initiated in response to coup attempts, such as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s post-July 2016 purges—do you see such a rush to punish and expel non-loyalists from the government.

The new administration also builds on the idea of “**power verticals**” such as that created by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who allied with oligarchs and billionaires to expand control of the media and other sectors and allow him to consolidate his personal power. Those personalist dynamics characterize current autocracies in Turkey, Hungary, and India, and the support Trump receives from media tycoons such as Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos are an American equivalent.

And here is where the U.S. 2025 situation starts to look different. The point of personalist rule is to reinforce the **strongman**. There is only room for one authoritarian leader at the top of the power vertical. **Here there are two.**

Musk’s Autocratic Capture

Musk already had dangerous amounts of power in America due to his defense and other government contracts that make our national security partly dependent on his products. His takeover of Twitter, a platform widely used by governments and politicians around the world, gave him even more leverage. What he lacked was the key

to the castle, a way to get control of government from within. The **\$250 million** he spent to help Trump get elected helped to unlock the door. And so **DOGE was created as a vehicle for his infiltration.**

The press reported on Musk's unusual and constant presence at Mar-a-Lago, and the input he had on the presidential transition process, but did not highlight the likely aim behind it: to insert his private businesses into the governance equation. Employees from SpaceX and other Musk entities interviewed potential appointees for the Trump administration.

Now Musk and his surrogates have physically occupied the Office of Personnel Management, setting up beds to have a 24/7 presence. They have also infiltrated the **General Services Administration**, which manages technology in government buildings. Thomas Shedd, a former software engineer at Tesla, is now director of Technology Transformation Services within the GSA.

That means that random individuals, whose credentials seem to lie mainly in their loyalty to Musk, now have enormous power over America's purse strings and access to a treasure trove of sensitive personal data. They locked out the federal employees to prevent any obstructions to this access.

This is what militaries do during coups: you capture the major targets, with government buildings high on the list, and you take over communications and other systems.

Yet Musk did not need to deploy a private army to stage his coup. He was given permission to stage this operation by Trump's Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, a former hedge fund manager. Acting Deputy Treasury Secretary David Lebryk, a career civil servant, resisted when Musk allies demanded access to the payments system. Lebryk was then placed on administrative leave, at Bessent's suggestion.

According to a person interviewed by Politico, Musk's team gained entry on Bessent's assumption that the DOGE team's access would be "read-only." But Musk's social media posts indicate an intention to cut off funds of people and organizations designated as enemies.

When extremist and proponent of Evangelical Christian holy war Gen. Michael Flynn claimed on X that Lutheran Family Services charity and aid work was a cover for a “money laundering operation” that profits from federal funding, Musk responded: “The @DOGE team is rapidly shutting down these illegal payments.”

Musk and his minions are not working alone to destroy America. The GOP, Heritage, and many American actors are embedded in foreign autocratic and right-wing populist networks, while billionaires Musk and Thiel (and their muse, Curtis Yarvin, who tells his followers that “democracy is done”) have ambitions on a global scale that hinge on destroying open societies.

Through his various investments and companies, Musk is a business partner of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and other autocracies, and has been in regular contact with Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose dream is to see America implode from within. Even if Musk were removed tomorrow, he is part of a larger design to wreck America as a functioning democratic society and a global power. It is now America’s turn to be a laboratory of autocratic innovation.

Image: Source [Edited]

Source: <https://lucid.substack.com/p/a-new-kind-of-coup-trump-and-musk>

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